

today's hotelier

February 2021 | todayshotelier.com

The Official Publication of AAHOA



2021 Vision

The AAHOA Board of Directors shares changes to guest philosophies as we enter 2021

Great EXPECTATIONS

Bruce Haase, President and CEO of Extended Stay America, explains how brands can adapt to new safety plans for guests



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BIRAN PATEL
AAHOA CHAIRMAN (2021-2021)

“

Moving forward, it is clear that the next step in industry safety will be the vaccination of hospitality staff, both for the benefit of their health and the guests we service.”

Hospitality, health, and the road ahead

AAHOA HAS CONTINUED TO UPHOLD OUR MEMBER-CENTRIC MISSION SO CRITICAL to the hotelier and the hospitality industry with steadfast resolve and innovation. We are proud to have pushed through the most challenging year on record. Yet for travel to fully return, our communities must first overcome the imminent threat this pandemic still poses. The recovery of our industry and the health of the nation go hand in hand. I look to the national development and distribution of vaccines as a glimmer of light at the end of a long, trying period of darkness and difficulties. As the frontline medical workers and at-risk citizens receive the first wave of vaccines, we can embrace this glimmer of light and renew our hopes for the future.

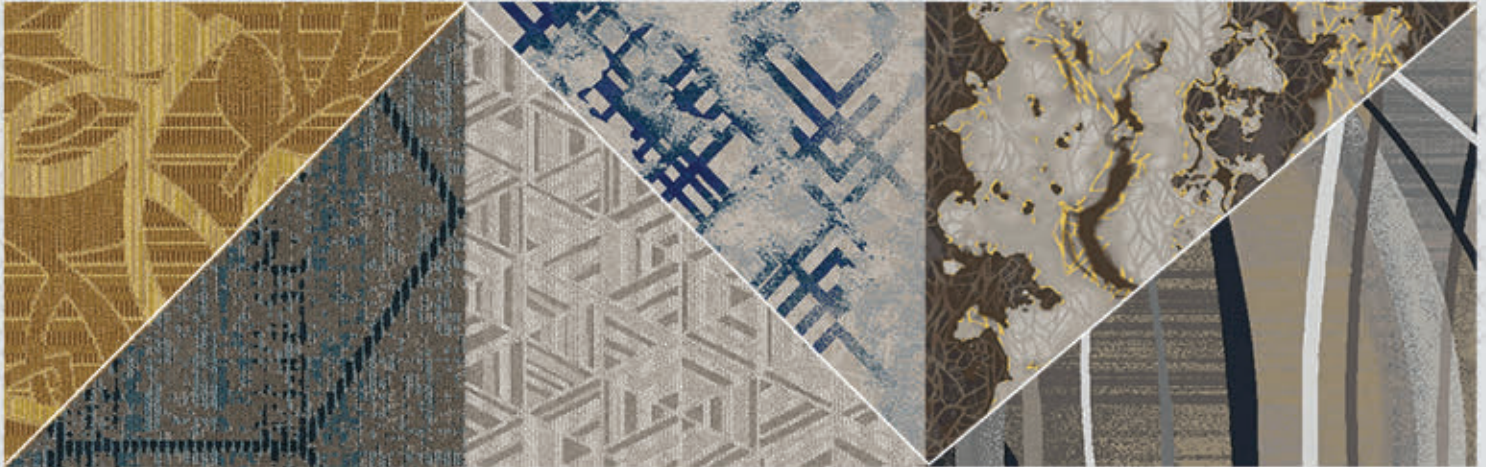
Less than one year ago, our nation's economy ground to a halt. Many AAHOA Members and hotel owners stepped up to provide housing to medical workers, the homeless, and others adversely affected by the pandemic. Through our efforts, hotels have been deemed essential businesses from the onset, affording our businesses to provide critical services to our communities while keeping the lights on. AAHOA coordinated with our industry partners at the state and federal levels to ensure hospitality services remained open and readily available to assist our communities in any way possible. We implemented new cleaning standards, adopted industry-best practices, and shifted our operations so that our guests and staff are safe, healthy, and protected. Moving forward, it is clear that the next step in industry safety will be the vaccination of hospitality staff, both for the benefit of their health and the guests we service.

The Biden administration has taken the reins of the Trump administration's pandemic response, and we are monitoring the rollout of new pandemic response policies and plans. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and administration issue federal guidance on the vaccine distribution strategy, and governors ultimately manage the in-state logistics and allocation phases of the vaccines. In the coming phases of the vaccine distribution, AAHOA is advocating for hospitality workers to be appropriately classified in the vaccine distribution strategy. We are on the frontlines, but we will not jump the line. AAHOA places confidence in the CDC and governors to, when appropriate, make the vaccine available to the workers who keep the hospitality industry running.

This issue of *Today's Hotelier* highlights the great expectations levied upon the hospitality industry in response to the pandemic. There is an excellent piece highlighting the importance of brand communication and customer service for the hotel guest both before booking and even after check in. I encourage you to read the feature by Bruce Haase, President and CEO of Extended Stay America on page 14.

As your AAHOA Chairman, I'll leave you with my own expectations for our association as we approach the one-year mark of this pandemic. The unifying trials of the pandemic have brought the AAHOA community together like never before. We are all working to bring our businesses back to the healthy operations we enjoyed in 2019. As many experts have noted, this could take years. AAHOA has already begun preparing the hotelier for recovery, and I look forward to leading our efforts to provide valuable resources and a sense of community for you, my fellow hoteliers. ■

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CECIL P. STATON
AAHOA PRESIDENT & CEO

The prospects ahead for AAHOA

“
Going forward,
the civic
engagement
of our AAHOA
Members
will weigh
immensely on
the efficacy of our
advocacy work.”

IN THE EARLY WEEKS OF MOST PRESIDENCIES, THE ADMINISTRATION SETS OUT to confirm their Cabinet nominees and debut its policy agenda. For President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, inaugurated amid a raging pandemic and President Trump’s lingering impeachment trial, the circumstances are certainly unprecedented. The Biden-Harris administration has a unique set of challenges to confront in its first 100 days, from rehabilitating political unity to expanding the federal government’s pandemic response.

AAHOA has long been a proponent of bipartisan, pro-small business policies and political unity. As we saw in the eight-month gap between the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act and the \$900-billion stimulus package passed in late December, partisan disconnect only exacerbates the pandemic’s mounting toll on our industry. The prospects of further pandemic relief are promising under President Biden, who has consistently called for another economic stimulus package. Securing additional relief for the hospitality industry remains a top legislative priority for AAHOA, and we are committed to working with the Biden administration and the 117th Congress to achieve it.

During the coming months, AAHOA will have many opportunities to build new connections, and advocate for relief tailored to fit our industry’s needs. However, there are bound to be policy proposals that run counter to the needs of our members in a Democratic controlled Congress and White House. President Biden, a reputedly moderate Democrat, will face pressure from the more progressive wing of the Democratic party, which played a substantial role in securing his election, to roll back certain Trump-era policies. We can expect to see challenges to some provisions in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, among other laws passed during President Trump’s term. Rest assured that AAHOA is closely monitoring any and all proposals in Washington, D.C., and will continue to advocate on behalf of America’s hoteliers.

Going forward, the civic engagement of our AAHOA Members will weigh immensely on the efficacy of our advocacy work. This past year, AAHOA advocates expended time and energy to meet with their members of Congress, work with the AAHOA team, and power our grassroots campaigns, sending nearly 70,000 letters to Congress. I am proud of the work we do as an association, and I look forward to building upon it further. To all AAHOA Members, wherever you are, the AAHOA staff and community are here to support you, your families, and your businesses. Our industry has many challenging days, but an imminent widespread rollout of vaccines and pandemic relief, we can rest assured that travel will resume and recovery will begin. ■

5 Things To Know

About AAHOA This Month



Help AAHOA recognize shining stars. Each year, AAHOA honors hoteliers for their contributions to the hospitality industry. Do you know a hotelier who you feel has gone above and beyond in their efforts? If so, now is the time to nominate him or her for one of seven awards to be bestowed at AAHOACON21 in Dallas, TX. You do not need to be an AAHOA Member to submit a nomination. For eligibility and nomination info, visit AAHOA.com/Awards.

Join us for a day of golf to benefit charity. AAHOA has a full slate of charity golf tournaments planned for 2021, so plan to come out for a day of golf and networking, all while supporting worthwhile causes. Join us for a safe, masked, socially distanced day on the greens and help make a difference. Register today at AAHOA.com/events/golf; space is limited.



AAHOA Southeast Texas Inaugural Charity Golf Tournament

April 6, Wildcat Golf Club
Houston, TX

AAHOA Southwest-Phoenix Charity Golf Tournament

April 8, Ocotillo Golf Club
Chandler, AZ

AAHOA North Central Inaugural Charity Golf Tournament

June 9-10, Deer Creek Golf Course
Clayton, IN

AAHOA North Carolina Charity Golf Tournament

August 14-15, Rocky River Golf Club
Concord, NC

AAHOA Northwest Charity Golf Tournament

August 23, Langdon Farms Golf Club
Aurora, OR

AAHOA North Pacific Inaugural Charity Golf Tournament

Dates and location to be announced soon

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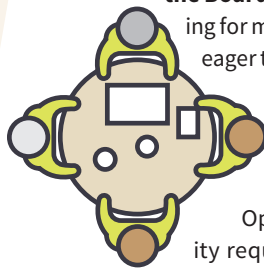
We know hoteliers need critical data now. This Market Analytics, Pace & Performance (MAPP) tool, developed by myDigital Office, helps users make strategic, data-backed business decisions for economic recovery. It's based on the crowdsourcing of anonymized hotel data, so the greater the number of users, the more robust and useful the data becomes. This resource provides real-time insight into revenues, forward-looking indicators, and market potential for recovery. Learn more at AAHOA.com/mapp.



Want to make a difference? Serve on the Board of Directors.

We are looking for motivated members who are eager to assist AAHOA in achieving its latest goals as set forth in the 2021-2023 Strategic Plan. Answer the call and volunteer to serve.

Open positions and eligibility requirements are available at AAHOA.com/2021candidates.



Not even a pandemic could stop us. In a year unlike any other, nothing could keep us from providing AAHOA Members with what they needed to survive the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year alone, we offered members:

- **The nation's first major all-virtual convention and trade show.** Did you know that all content from AAHOACON20 is available on AAHOA's YouTube channel? Visit AAHOA's channel to watch.
- **240+ webcasts featuring nearly 300 leaders and subject-matter experts.** You had questions about all things COVID-19. We got you answers. Find them all at AAHOA.com/webcasts.
- **Nearly 65 live virtual events, including 11 Q&As with brands.** Watch the on-demand videos for all past events and also check the schedule for upcoming events at AAHOA.com/virtualevents.
- **8 virtual regional conferences and trade shows.** If you were unable to attend, you still can view all 22 education sessions at youtube.com/c/AAHOA/videos.
- **25 call-to-action campaigns with more than 61,000 letters sent.** You can see all of AAHOA's past and current advocacy efforts as well as join the fight yourself at AAHOA.com.

The Biden takeover: What the hotel owner can expect

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

O N JAN. 20, 2021, PRESIDENT Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris received the keys to the White House. In the wake of the tense 2020 election cycle, the Biden administration must confront innumerable challenges, ranging from reconciliation to recovery.

A POLARIZED SYSTEM

The aftermath of the 2020 elections sowed deep and disruptive polarization in the American political system. With the second COVID-19 relief package signed into law and the pivotal Georgia Senate runoff races tilting the balance of power in favor of the Democratic party, President Biden could choose the road less traveled in years past – a bipartisan legislative agenda geared towards economic recovery, public health care, and direct stimulus to invigorate the economy.

Now, in 2021, President Biden will embark upon his presidency with Democratic control in both chambers of Congress, albeit with a slim majority. The pandemic response will remain center stage for the fledgling administration. With ambitious policy proposals vulnerable to filibusters and party-line defectors, the Biden administration will take an incremental approach when introducing policies promised on the campaign trail.

NEW ADMINISTRATION, SAME CHALLENGES. WHAT'S NEXT?

America's hoteliers are 11 months into the most devastating period for the hotel industry in decades. President Biden has experience with national crises, having engaged in the 2008 recession and subsequent recovery. In the Obama administration, Biden spearheaded the stimulus

efforts in Congress, relying upon his experience as an institutionalist lawmaker to negotiate across the aisle. Under these parameters, Biden will aim to prioritize national distribution of vaccines coupled with measures to bolster public health and safety. As the vaccine distribution program is underway, AAHOA is engaging with federal agencies to ensure that hotel staff, who have been deemed essential workers since the onset of the pandemic, are appropriately categorized into the distribution plan.

AAHOA'S RESPONSE

The Biden administration will inherit the \$900-billion relief package passed in December of 2020. A new round of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) funding, debt relief, and tax-deductible provisions will remain unaltered. AAHOA President & CEO Cecil P. Staton issued the following statement on this package:

“For hoteliers, the most significant components in this package include a second round of PPP funding to help keep employees on payroll during the most difficult time of year. We also particularly appreciate that congressional leaders understood

the unique challenges faced by hoteliers and provided an increase in the PPP loan amounts to our industry. In addition to addressing payroll challenges, this bill also includes critical banking relief to enable hoteliers to defer mortgage payments for the near term. AAHOA Members and our partners across lodging, banking, and small business rallied together to fight for a year-long extension for troubled debt restructuring (TDR) classification and after much debate, our priority was included in the final bill. The legislation also includes more funding for Small Business Administration programs, including 504, 7(a) and Economic Disaster Loans (EIDL). We are grateful for these inclusions because they are literally the difference between remaining open and going into foreclosure for countless hotel owners.”

The Biden administration also has clarified its intention to implement mask mandates and social-distancing guidelines aimed to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Aiming to vaccinate 100 million more Americans in 100 days, the new administration posits a promising step toward recovery, even as the pandemic rages. ■

STRATOS BRILLAKIS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

116th Congress delivers relief, funds government in its final hours

Common Ground profiles members of opposing parties who are working together to advance issues important to hoteliers.

by SEAN GROSSNICKLE

ROB CRANDALL/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

THE ISSUE

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES Act) passed in late March of 2020, providing federal stimulus to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on public health and the economy. The \$2.2-trillion CARES Act was the largest stimulus bill in the history of the United States. For months, members of Congress and the Trump administration entrenched themselves in partisan negotiations over the scope, scale, and content of a second pandemic assistance package. Having passed the momentous CARES Act, the decision-makers in Washington, D.C., were split – was spending \$2.2 trillion too much or not enough?

This division paralyzed Congress for months on end, carrying the gridlocked negotiations over a second round of pandemic assistance beyond even the 2020 elections. Stimulus packages passed in the House were rejected by the Senate, and vice versa. The need for relief was there, but Congress failed to find the common ground. Heading into December, Democrats advocating for state and local

funding clashed with Republicans who sought to include business liability protection. America's hoteliers, like many small business owners, were subjected to the pitfalls of political infighting further exacerbated in a competitive election year.

COMMON GROUND

After eight months of fruitless negotiations, Congress coupled a second COVID-19 relief package with the necessary government funding bill needed to prevent a government shutdown. Both chambers of Congress extended their sessions and reached a compromise on a \$900-billion COVID-19 relief package that was amended into the larger \$1.4-trillion omnibus spending package. Late into the evening on Dec. 21, 2020, the House presented the resolved and amended COVID-19 Relief and Fiscal 2021 Omnibus to the Senate, which voted to send the bill to President Trump on a vote of 92 to 6. President Trump signed the package into law on Dec. 27, 2020. ■

**Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA),
Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives**

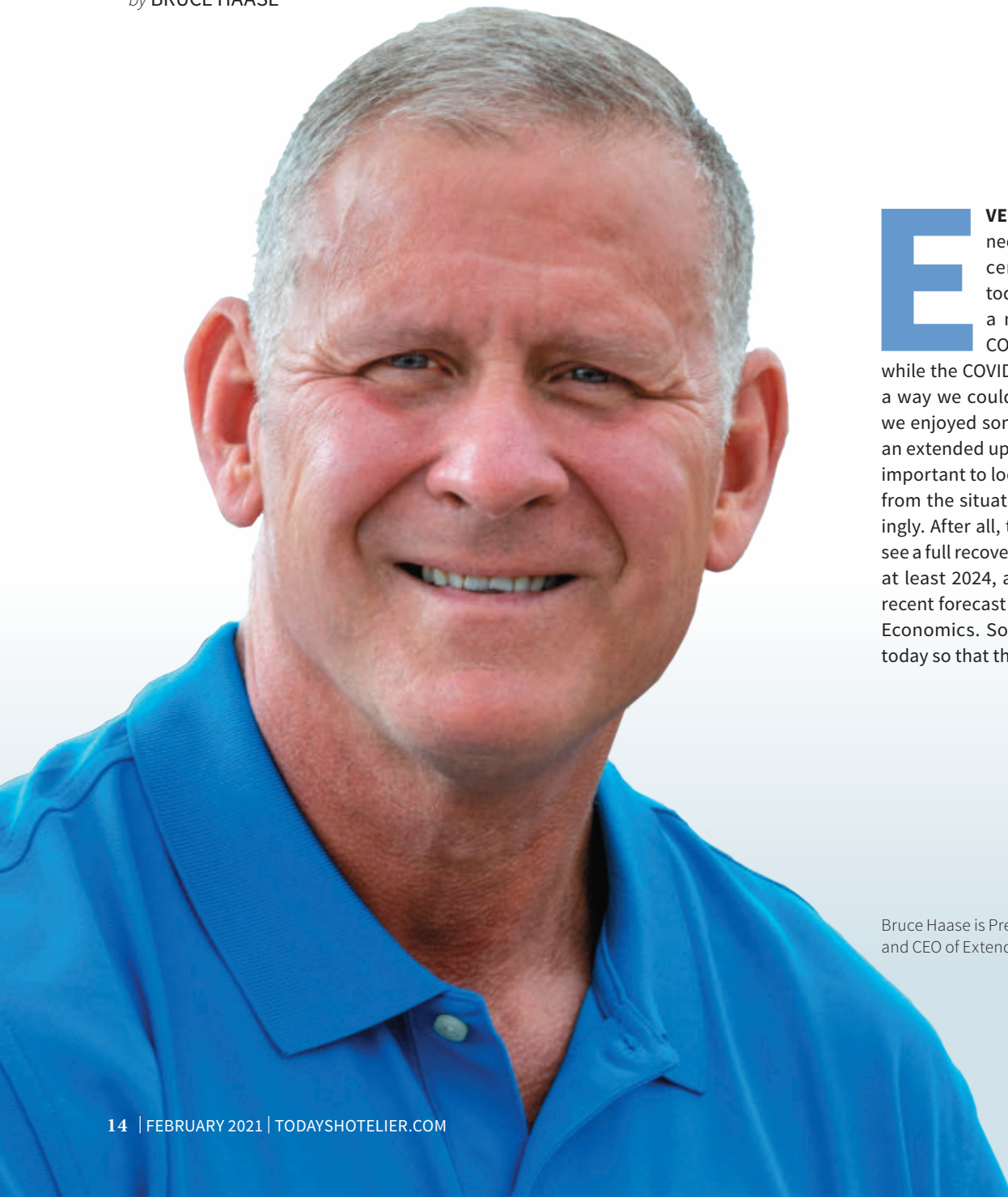
"The signing of the bipartisan, bicameral coronavirus relief legislation is welcome news for the 14 million Americans who just lost the lifeline of unemployment benefits on Christmas Weekend, and for the millions more struggling to stay afloat during this historic pandemic and economic crisis."

**Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-KY),
Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate**

"The bipartisan rescue package that Republicans in Congress and the Trump Administration negotiated with the Democrats will extend another major lifeline to workers at struggling small businesses, renew major relief for laid-off Americans, invest billions more in vaccine distribution, send cash directly to households, and more. The compromise bill is not perfect, but it will do an enormous amount of good for struggling Kentuckians and Americans across the country who need help now."

Guest expectations have changed — have brands?

by BRUCE HAASE



EVERY CRISIS BEGETS THE need for change and that's certainly no different today as brands navigate a new terrain amid the COVID-19 pandemic. But, while the COVID crisis has hit travel in a way we couldn't have imagined as we enjoyed some of the best years in an extended upturn just prior to it, it's important to look at how we can learn from the situation and adapt accordingly. After all, the experts don't foresee a full recovery for our industry until at least 2024, according to the most recent forecast from STR and Tourism Economics. So, what can brands do today so that they don't perish?

Bruce Haase is President and CEO of Extended Stay America.



Yes, hotels are a place for people to put their heads. But at the end of the day, we are a service industry. We are there to make guests feel comfortable. When they feel so, we've done our job."

There's no doubt that expectations have changed due to COVID-19. Communication with guests has always been a key to success, but now it's more important than ever. Particularly, guests want and need to know what brands are doing to keep them safe. For the most part, brands seem to understand this. Months ago, many of the major hotel brands announced their enhanced cleanliness and safety plans. It was a good first step, but a brand's No. 1 job during this crisis is to continue to manage expectations for guests and owners. Here's how the nimblest brands can adapt.

OVER COMMUNICATION ISN'T A BAD THING

It's quite simple: guests need to know what you're doing to keep them safe, and brands can't assume that the way in which customers gather their information is one size fits all. Guests expect to see and clearly understand the brand's promise prior to arrival, experience it during their stay, and be reminded of it afterward.

That means brands need to outline cleanliness programs on their websites so people can make an informed decision to book. Upon arrival, guests then

expect to be reassured that brands take their safety seriously. Hotels should have digital signage throughout the property, including at high touchpoints such as elevators, guestrooms, and bathrooms to quickly alert guests of cleanliness procedures. When a guest checks in, front-desk team members also need to clearly and confidently explain any new processes that bring the brand promise to life. For example, inform them whether fitness centers, pools, and other amenities have been closed. In an extended-stay hotel, share procedures such as contactless linen delivery. The key is to set the expectations for their stay right away, as confusion will lead to lower guest satisfaction.

Of course, your relationship with guests doesn't end at checkout, and communication goes both ways. Follow up with post-stay surveys to garner feedback. Not only will you glean useful data about what you did right, but you'll also see how you can improve for the next guest. If multiple guests say they don't want their rooms cleaned every week in an extended-stay hotel, for example, then you know how to adjust operations accordingly to meet expectations.

WITHOUT FOLLOW-THROUGH, IT'S NOTHING

It's not enough to communicate with guests if there's no follow-through to back it up. Brands can often be fragmented entities, with some owners adhering to every standard while others aren't. Customers need to trust that brands are consistently keeping their promises irrespective of ownership. Otherwise, they'll go straight to the competition who is delivering. Guests today, more than ever, are booking travel based on the safety promise. So,

for instance, if the brand promise is that a guestroom door will be sealed off with a cleanliness sticker to alert guests that no one else has touched the room since cleaning and then it's not there on arrival, trust is immediately shattered. You've lost a customer (and other potential guests when the bad reviews hit the sites) to the hotel across the street that will follow-through.

FLEXIBILITY IS THE FOUNDATION

Especially during a pandemic when information about a new disease changes

constantly, guest expectations change quickly. Likewise, hotels' processes and procedures need to adapt just as fast. When COVID-19 first hit, changes at the brand level during those first two weeks were almost a daily occurrence. What might have been a good decision one day wasn't the best decision the next as new information was released. At one point during the pandemic, the focus was on cleaning touchpoints over masks. Then, we learned the virus was spread more through the air than through touch. So, instead of constantly cleaning fitness equipment, the decision then came to close the fitness centers instead.

When decisions are flying so quickly, it's ever more critical to keep that channel of communication open with guests and set expectations in order to dispel disappointment. Yes, hotels are a place for people to put their heads. But at the end of the day, we are a service industry. We are there to make guests feel comfortable. When they feel so, we've done our job. And brands cannot do that without flexibility and, where applicable, alignment across multiple ownership groups.

A NEW WORLD

One thing is certain: The world will never be the same. And brands cannot go back to how things were before the pandemic. They will need to make more decisions and go back to the drawing board.

Ten years ago, the hospitality industry enjoyed brand differentiation. A large hotel company could have upward of 30 brands – and it worked because there were differences in amenities. But will brands have the ability to differentiate the way they used to? For brands with a big breakfast buffet as a central standard, will guests ever feel comfortable eating at buffets again? How about communal spaces? Will people want to gather with strangers anytime soon?

Guest expectations will continue to change as we move through and past the pandemic. Brands that are flexible and nimble will rise to the occasion, while those slow to adapt will fall. Now is the time for brands to listen to guests and find opportunity amid this time of uncertainty. ■

Bruce Haase is President and CEO of Extended Stay America.



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MORE AND ACCESS THE TRAINING TODAY!



An **A** for effort

New consumer demands, disruptions to business travel, and embracing technology are just some of the challenges hoteliers have faced head-on

by NICK FORTUNA

EVEN WITH TRAVEL AT historically low levels this past year, hoteliers and brands have earned consumers' trust through their steadfast commitment to cleaning, sanitation, and communication – and innovation. That's just some positive feedback from Dave Hilfman, interim Executive Director of the Global Business Travel Association, who praised the hotel industry for being quick to react to the pandemic and quickly enhancing their cleaning and safety procedures.

The GBTA, an Alexandria, VA-based group representing about 9,000 business-travel professionals around the world, has polled its members about industry issues throughout the pandemic, Hilfman said.

One recent survey asked them to judge the effectiveness of safety campaigns across different supplier types, and 78 percent of respondents said hotels' campaigns

had been effective or very effective, illustrating a high level of confidence in hotels' cleaning standards.

"We applaud the hotel industry worldwide for the significant investments made to enhance the overall customer experience for business travelers, especially when it comes to safety and security," Hilfman said.

In a separate survey, the GBTA asked members to identify five ways hotels could address concerns about health and safety, and the top answer, cited by 79 percent of respondents, was to increase their cleaning standards. That was followed by requiring employees to wear masks (58 percent), providing additional staff training about COVID-19 sanitary practices and incident reporting (55 percent), requiring guests to wear masks in common areas (47 percent), and providing guests with safety information about their hotel stay (44 percent).

Other suggested actions for hotels included enforcing physical-distancing guidelines (38 percent), installing signs to remind guests and employees of best sanitation practices (37 percent), providing masks to guests (22 percent), and having housekeeping visit rooms only when requested by guests, thereby reducing the likelihood of viral transmission (21 percent).

“

Other suggested actions for hotels included enforcing physical-distancing guidelines (**38 percent**), installing signs to remind guests and employees of best sanitation practices (**37 percent**), providing masks to guests (**22 percent**), and having housekeeping visit rooms only when requested by guests, thereby reducing the likelihood of viral transmission (**21 percent**).”



NATCHA YAMKASAMKUL/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

SURVEY SAYS...

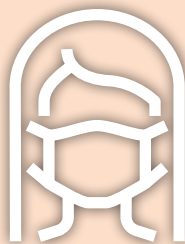
According to the GBTA survey, these are the **top 5 ways** hoteliers can address guests' safety concerns as they return to travel:

Increase hotel cleaning standards



Require employees to wear masks

Provide additional staff training about COVID-19 sanitary practices and incident reporting



Require guests to wear masks in common areas

Provide guests with safety information about their hotel stay



These are just some of the best practices that have surfaced in the wake of the pandemic. We know now that many hotel brands, franchisees, and independent hoteliers quickly incorporated this new normal into their operations and ingrained it into their company cultures, quickly ramping up employees and rethinking every aspect of their operations.

PROVIDING TRANSPARENCY AND RAMPING UP CONSUMER MARKETING

The survey results show that travelers want to know what hotels are doing to keep them safe and hoteliers are granting that transparency. Last spring and summer, nearly every major hotel brand launched their own safety protocol programs, quickly pivoting to provide guidance and recommendations for a safe operation, which was incredibly important as hotels were considered essential businesses with many remaining open throughout the pandemic.

It's one thing to create the protocols and standards, communicate them to hoteliers, and then implement them. But all that effort goes to waste without a solid strategy behind marketing and communications.

Many brands leapt into action and ramped up marketing and communication efforts to allow guests a detailed look at the precautions they were putting in place. From brief animated videos that walked viewers through a wide range of initiatives, including providing more individually wrapped grab-and-go food options, and checking the temperature of employees and vendors, to locking or removing minibars, providing a clean and disinfected television remote control in a sealed protective bag, and providing each guest room with a travel-size bottle of hand sanitizer – the industry banded together to ensure that travelers felt safe when visiting their properties. This undoubtedly put the guest experience front and center and completely reimagined the way hoteliers and their employees interact with guests.

Many hotels are now required to pass a comprehensive local audit so they can tout

AAHOA/P&G PROFESSIONAL'S TRAINING IN HOTEL SANITIZATION AND CLEANLINESS

Not sure where to start? AAHOA has partnered with P&G Professional to create a training for what hoteliers need most.

See page 17 for more information!



We applaud the hotel industry worldwide for the significant investments made to enhance the overall customer experience for business travelers, especially when it comes to safety and security.”

– Dave Hilfman, interim Executive Director
of the Global Business Travel Association

and display the certain health and safety protocols and recognition throughout their touchpoints with guests – be it onsite, on their hotel websites, or on each hotel’s Google My Business listing. Brands stepped up consumer-safety marketing efforts as well, with many utilizing social-media, paid-search, and video-streaming ads to make guests aware of the advanced safety measures being implemented.

EXPLORING TECH SOLUTIONS

With COVID-19 sure to linger a while, nearly every hotel company is investigating and turning to technology to curb viral spread. Hoteliers know that by limiting the number of interactions between guests and workers and reducing the usage of high-touch surfaces, hotels can decrease the risk of transmission – although many of these initiatives require a significant upfront investment from hoteliers. However, even with the pandemic eventually behind us, many affirm that technology and contactless interactions are here to stay.

Even before the pandemic, the industry was all a buzz around the latest tech solutions, including keyless room entry using smartphone apps, voice-activated controls in guest rooms for lights, air conditioning, and the TV, and robots that deliver room service and other essentials to guests. Moving forward, utilizing and incorporating these types of technology won’t just be for the early adopters. Hoteliers from all segments are grappling with how to best embrace technology and contactless interactions, knowing that it is no longer just a trend, but something guests will come to expect from any hotel stay.

THE NEW OFFICE SPACE

Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates made headlines in mid-November when he predicted that global business travel would be halved and the number of days the typical employee spends in the office would decline 30 percent in the years following the pandemic. Technological advances such as online video conferencing have made it easy to work from home and to collaborate with partners around the world, he said.

A sharp reduction in business travel obviously would be bad news for hoteliers. But Hilfman said the work-from-home movement could allow hotels to serve as flexible office or meeting space as companies downsize their permanent office footprints.

“With so many people now working from home, hotels are well positioned to fulfill this alternative,” he said.

In fact, the term “Office-pocalypse” has crept into today’s real estate vocabulary, which has been recently reinforced by from Global Workplace Analytics’ prediction that up to 30 percent of the workforce will continue to work from home at least until the end of 2021.

Market demands and pandemic realities have forced changes in the industry – consumer demands, changes in business travel, embracing technology out of necessity, and using space wisely to recoup revenue are just some of the long-lasting effects of the pandemic. Whether fortunate or unfortunate, many of these things are here to stay. Hoteliers who embrace these changes to the industry long-term will be the ones who bounce back the quickest. ■

PART 4

THE PROS SPEAK UP

Nitin Shah, President of Imperial Investments Group, Inc., talks about lessons learned from past hurdles and how he applied those to surviving COVID-19

by PETER BERK



Nitin Shah is the President of Imperial Investments Group, Inc., Chairman and CEO of Embassy National Bank, and AAHOA's third chairman.

AS THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY CONTINUES TO face unparalleled economic hardships imposed by COVID-19, we are pleased to present the next interview with one of AAHOA's founders and past chairmen. The discussions shed light on the struggles they went through as both owners and chair, as well as how those experiences prepared them to face today's challenges. For this month's edition, we had an exclusive chat with Nitin Shah, President, Imperial Investments Group, Inc., a Georgia-based hospitality company he founded in 1984. Assets include numerous hotels as well as various commercial real estate holdings.

Shah also is chairman and CEO of Embassy National Bank, an Atlanta-based community bank he helped establish in 2007, which is a leading hotel and SBA lender in the southeastern U.S.

In 1989, he was one of the founders of AAHOA and became its third chairman in 1993. Shah was instrumental in increasing membership and revenue. Today, he continues to be active in AAHOA. Nitin has served on several committees over the years. Currently, he serves on the Franchise & Industry Relations Committee and the Past Chair Council.

He serves on the advisory boards for the College of Business at Georgia College and for Asian Studies at Kennesaw State University. Shah co-chairs the Global Organization of People of Indian Origin (GOPIO) Chamber of Commerce.

Born in Mumbai, Shah earned his undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering at the University of Bombay, and his master's in Business Administration at Georgia College and State University.

WHAT WAS THE FIRST HOTEL YOU OWNED AND WHERE WAS IT?

Days Inn, Milledgeville, GA

HOW MANY HOTELS DOES YOUR FIRM OWN TODAY AND WHAT BRANDS?

Fifteen hotels comprised of Hilton (Hampton, Hilton Garden Inn), Marriott (Fairfield, Sheraton), IHG (Holiday Inn Express), and Choice branded properties.

WHEN OPENING YOUR FIRST HOTEL, YOU WERE FACED WITH MANY CHALLENGES. BUT DESCRIBE A CHALLENGE THAT WAS COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED.

The biggest challenge I faced when I opened my first hotel was a lack of willingness from bankers, franchise companies, insurance agents, and even other hoteliers to work with an Indian owner.

HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THAT CHALLENGE?

I overcame this challenge in several ways. First, I utilized my extensive experience in banking and finance. I was able to speak the same language as the lenders and show the franchise companies and other partners the value I brought to the deal. Second was banding with several other owners facing the same challenges. We collectively reached out to Mike Leven, Henry Silverman, and Jerry Merkin, who not only listened to our issues but took interest and helped us form AAHOA. Through AAHOA, we were able to help educate our community on how to become better hoteliers, which gave us a voice and power to affect change.



WHAT WERE THE FIRST FEW THINGS YOU DID AT YOUR FIRM WHEN YOU REALIZED THE COVID-19 CRISIS WOULD BE SERIOUS?

We looked at each property individually and strategized on the best way to mitigate the impact, whether it was to close the property, close a restaurant, or even close all public facilities to ensure survival. We contacted all our partners – lenders, franchisors, and vendors – to share our plan as well as to ask for their help and input. Most of our small lenders stepped up to help, but the big banks were harder to deal with, some asking for three months’ advance payment to get a deferral. Our vendors were understanding and deferred payment. Many franchise partners stepped up with innovative ways and programs to help us survive. We learned communication was the most important tool in this crisis. This process still needs to continue.



Many franchise partners stepped up with innovative ways and programs to help us survive. We learned communication was the most important tool in this crisis. This process still needs to continue.”



HOW DID YOU MAKE THE DECISION TO KEEP YOUR HOTELS OPEN OR CLOSE THEM?

A cost analysis was done on each property to help us determine the best course forward on a case-by-case basis. In some properties, we made the hard decision to keep them open with only one or two staff members to maintain and monitor the hotel along with taking care of the building and ensuring the safety of those guests we had.

DESCRIBE HOW THE LESSONS YOU LEARNED FROM YOUR FIRST UNEXPECTED CRISIS OPENING YOUR FIRST HOTEL HELPED YOUR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS?

Our experience in the early days running hotels with minimal resources and learning how to negotiate with lenders was beneficial. We used all the government-provided resources like the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) and Economic Injury Disaster Loans (EIDL) and took care of our long-term employees.

WHAT IS SOMETHING INTERESTING THAT PEOPLE PROBABLY DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU?

Having banking experience helped me tremendously because I was able to not only help myself but many others on the best way to negotiate with lenders, understand loan documents, covenant clauses, banking regulators, COVID-19 regulations, CMBS documents, and back-end workings so that they can navigate their loan problems without losing the property.

WHAT ADVICE WOULD YOU GIVE TO OTHER HOTEL OWNERS TO GET THROUGH THIS CURRENT CRISIS?

The most important advice is to communicate with your lender to ensure you are not in default and make sure you have the proper insurance to cover a significant loss. Everything else you can always get back. The most important thing is to take care of your health and not let the pandemic stress you out.

THE BIG CRYSTAL BALL QUESTION: WHEN DO YOU EXPECT REVPAR TO GET BACK TO 2019 LEVELS?

2022 if a vaccine or treatment is widely available. ■



Peter Berk is President of PMZ Realty Capital LLC – Hotel Finance Group. He has more than 26 years of experience in the real estate industry and is a frequent lecturer at industry events, including AAHOA webinars and meetings. He has arranged more than \$6 billion of debt and equity transactions for hotel owners, representing more than 50,000 hotel rooms. As an industry leader, he has worked with AAHOA Members for more than 20 years on their financing needs. Berk attended George Washington University as an undergraduate and holds a graduate degree from Columbia University. He can be reached at berk@pmzcapital.com or 212-277-8265.

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FEATURE

2021 VISION

The AAHOA Board of Directors shares changes to guest philosophies and advice as we enter 2021 amid COVID-19

by THE AAHOA BOARD OF DIRECTORS

BLUE PLANET STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM, WHO IS DANNY/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM



BIRAN PATEL
CHAIRMAN

This is a time when we must go above and beyond the norm when it comes to cleanliness and sanitization to make guests feel safe traveling again – even if we incur more cost to create that environment. This should lead to positive reviews which, at the end of the day, give you better results.



JAGRUTI PANWALA
PAST CHAIR

Treat your guests like your family. They should feel they are home away from home when they are staying at our hotels.



RAHUL PATEL
FLORIDA REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Listen and understand your guests, make them feel special during their stay, and make sure you are doing all the basics right. Positive reviews and word of mouth are the best forms of marketing. Repeat guests will provide you the most profitable form of revenue, especially in the times of crisis.



NARESH (ND) BHAKTA
GREATER LOS ANGELES AREA REGIONAL DIRECTOR

In our culture, the guest is equal to god. In other words, guests deserve the highest respect from us. Go above and beyond. In hospitality, *that* is the relationship we have.



SANJAY M. PATEL
ALABAMA DIRECTOR

Most certainly, we all had clean and comfortable rooms pre-pandemic, but now our guests need to understand our cleanliness via signage, verbally, and by sight.



VIKESH (VIK) ZAVER
GEORGIA REGIONAL DIRECTOR

My guest philosophy is to always make the customer feel like family because a happy guest will be a customer for life.



DANNY (CHINTU) PATEL
ARKANSAS REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Maintain clean and safe working environments, focus on cleanliness/safety, and have confidence in yourself that you are the difference maker in your hotel and community. Work with your fellow hoteliers and see how you can maintain together and work with each other without dropping status.

AS COVID-19 ROCKED EVERY INDUSTRY, hotels were hit particularly hard causing some properties to close their doors. As the pandemic has increased guests' expectations of sanitization and safety, the AAHOA Board of Directors shares changes to guest philosophies and advice as we enter 2021 amid COVID-19 while recognizing that the key to recovery will begin by inspiring consumer confidence to travel.



VINAY PATEL
VICE CHAIR

Always try to anticipate your guests' needs so you can serve them better.



BHARAT PATEL
SECRETARY

Do what it takes to make your guests happy while keeping your team members safe.



KAMALESH (KP) PATEL
NORTH PACIFIC
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Treat your guests as if you are the guest!



DHIREN MASTERS
NORTH TEXAS
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

The guest still comes first, but furthermore, we want our guests to feel safe in our hotels and confident to travel. We are currently implementing contactless technology, so our guests are less exposed to the virus.



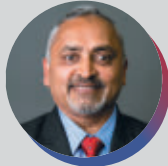
BHAVESH N. PATEL
NORTH CENTRAL
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

My philosophy is to provide guests with the best service possible. Meet the guests' needs and expectations, then provide service far beyond those requirements and assumptions – especially during the critical time of COVID-19. Provide training on these expectations for your staff members, too.



CHETAN (CHET) PATEL
SOUTH CAROLINA
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

One piece of advice I would give is to not sacrifice service to the guests. We currently live in a digital world and the guest will share their experience with others. If your guests share their great experiences during these times, you will benefit when we reach our new normal.



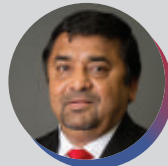
MIKE PATEL
SOUTH CENTRAL
TEXAS REGIONAL
DIRECTOR

I strongly believe that to earn guest loyalty it's even more important to be ethical and socially responsible, particularly when resources are restricted and survival is under threat. It's a very tough and challenging time for all of us!



SUNIL PATEL
MID SOUTH
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

A higher priority must be given to guest safety and cleaning standards as guests want to feel safe and secure now more than ever.



SANJAY (SAM) PATEL
MID ATLANTIC
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

If there's any place where customers are likely to be paying attention to the type of service they receive, it's within the hospitality industry. Our job as hospitality service providers is to maintain customer happiness and satisfaction. Keep your customers at the forefront of your operational plans to hold your hospitality business afloat.



SAWAN H. PATEL
SOUTHEAST TEXAS
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

My team's guest philosophy is to transcend service to create unequivocal experiences for everyone who stays at Unity properties.



JAYESH R. PATEL
NORTHEAST
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Owning a hotel is big liability and has high fixed expenses. We must consider the slowdown of the economy or recessions and each hotel must build a reserve fund. Then, that should be part of the budget.



LINA PATEL
FEMALE DIRECTOR
EASTERN DIVISION

Our guest philosophy is to provide a customized service with a warm welcome to each and every person that walks into our hotel lobby. Greeting our guests with their names is the sweetest and most important sound that all human beings like to hear.



AKSHAT PATEL
NORTH CAROLINA
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Yes, guest expectations have changed, mainly for cleanliness and service. We work in guest service and hospitality. After this pandemic, guests expect to have spotless and clean rooms. So, we are taking additional steps and safety precautions to take care of each of our guests for their safety as well as our staffs' safety.



IMESH VAIDYA
SOUTHWEST
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

It is vital that we make decisions about our service and operations based on the guest perspective. Though our industry is facing tremendous financial burdens, the guest is still spending their hard-earned money with us. Do not give them any additional reasons to stay with our competition or other online accommodations such as Airbnb.



NIMESH (NICK) ZAVER
GULF REGIONAL
DIRECTOR

Treat guests the way you would want to be treated. Walk in as a guest and leave as family.



JAYESH (JAY) PATEL
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

You never know what type of day the guest is having. Always listen to their concerns first before jumping to conclusions. Most guests are not looking for any type of compensation; they are looking to be heard by the staff to find a solution to their problem.



KALPESH JOSHI
UPPER MIDWEST
REGIONAL DIRECTOR

Guests are not dependent on us. We're dependent on them. They are doing us a favor by coming to our door and giving us the opportunity to serve! In my opinion, the customer/guest is a god.



MIRAJ S. PATEL
YOUNG PROFESSIONAL
DIRECTOR WESTERN
DIVISION

My philosophy has changed as a result of the pandemic as I understand guests' expectations and demands will increase. The pandemic has reset our industry, and how we operate our hotels will also have to change moving forward. We will have to regain our guests' trust and confidence by consistently demonstrating a culture of efforts to deliver best-in-class guest satisfaction through cleanliness, service, and staying up to par.



BHAVIK PATEL
YOUNG PROFESSIONAL
DIRECTOR EASTERN
DIVISION

We have always prioritized guest safety in terms of security. However, we have altered our action plans to correlate with the latest up-to-date cleaning standards in order to ensure guest services exceed expectations.



PRASHANT PATEL
DIRECTOR AT LARGE

As a hotel industry, we exist due to the need for hospitality, a need to be home even when our guests are away from home.



SANDIP PATEL
WASHINGTON DC
AREA REGIONAL
DIRECTOR

My hotels are comprised of people who are dedicated to providing the best possible hotel rooms, service, and safety to our guests. The self-respect, pride, and commitment that all employees possess is what makes our hotels the successes that they are. Being better than you were the day before and continuing to learn every day is the foundation that our hotels are built upon. Personal service and attention to detail are what we're all about. Consistency in personal service is name recognition and reading your guest to learn what hospitality experience the guest is anticipating during each visit to our hotel. Attention to detail is going the extra mile to make sure all guests' needs are met. My philosophy toward the guest is "Do whatever it takes to please the guest with best experiences at our hotel." ■

Paying it forward

How AAHOA Member Shay Patel saw inequality and took the steps to eliminate it with Alley-Oop Kids

by SHAY PATEL

IN 2014, SHAY PATEL WITNESSED kids in his community who didn't have access to the same resources he did. Some of these were things we often take for granted, like appropriate shoes. But as COVID-19 has impacted the world, Patel took his cause one step further by getting donations of computers and tablets so kids in his community could partake in distance learning, too.



WHAT WAS YOUR INSPIRATION FOR STARTING THIS NONPROFIT?

When I was 11 (2014), I visited my local Boys & Girls Club for basketball practice and was so shocked to see that other kids there did not have basic basketball gear like I had. Some even wore flip-flops and, honestly, it made me feel sad and angry. Then and there, I decided to help eliminate this inequality and that's when Alley-Oop Kids was born. If I can help young people in my community, my hope and dream is that what I do here will have a ripple effect on communities all over the country and eventually the world.



WHEN DID YOU GET STARTED AND HOW?

We started in 2014. Alley-Oop Kids was originally just my mom and me brainstorming feasible ways we could help the kids at the Boys & Girls Club. I was empowered by the belief that I needed to help these kids get proper sports gear and by the belief that I wasn't too young to make a difference. As many early organizations do, we reached out to family and friends to get started with early donations for our first project. Through crowdfunding and with the help of more than 15 kid volunteers, I raised \$6,000 for new gear for the entire basketball program of the Boys & Girls of the Peninsula.

(L to R) Student Lead & App Team member Sohan Gaitonde, Chief Fundraising Officer Rishan Patel, CEO & Founder Shay Patel, and Ambassador Lead & Board Secretary Akshaan Ahuja.

PHOTO: SUMIT KOHLI, SREEL





Camp Alley-Oop provides free basketball training to middle-school students.

PHOTO: SUMIT KOHLI, SREEL



HOW HAS BEING FROM A HOTELIER FAMILY INFLUENCED OR IMPACTED YOUR PHILANTHROPIC WORK?

As a third-generation immigrant born into a hotelier family, I have been around the hotel-owning community my entire life. As the first hotelier in the family, my grandfather Mahendra Parbhubhai Patel came to the United States from Zambia with just a few dollars in his pocket and an intention to achieve the American Dream. Despite the lack of capital, he used his innate business acumen to purchase his first roadside motel in Menlo Park, CA, in the early 1970s. He and my grandmother Ramila Patel worked hard (that's an understatement) to keep food on their large family's table and a roof over their head, often entailing exhausting night shifts and laborious room cleaning, all the while making their motel living quarters their warm home. The next generation, my father and mother, Bimal Patel and Supna Kohli Patel, were blessed with a solid foundation of a college education, corporate work experience, and the existing family business, which enabled them to set sights on expansion. My parents were able to successfully grow the hotel business over the years and with that came an opportunity to look beyond ourselves and to start helping others. I have been fortunate enough to live comfortably due to the hard work of previous generations. However, being exposed to less-fortunate communities through travel basketball and even through interaction with our own hotel staff, I realized at a young age that many other families are still where my grandfather was when he first came to America. That realization has inspired me to take action to help others in ways I can, adding another layer to our family realizing the American Dream by paying it forward.



HOW CAN THE AAHOA COMMUNITY GET INVOLVED WITH THE CAUSE?

We are so grateful to so many San Francisco Bay Area AAHOA Members who have generously donated to our cause over the years. We rely on these donations to keep impacting kids. Tax-deductible donations can be made on our website, www.alleyoopkids.org, or you can download our free app. If you have any sports equipment or eLearning devices (old computers, tablets, etc.), post them on the app and someone in your area who needs it will contact you. From there, all you have to do is set up a pickup point,

which could simply be leaving it on your doorstep and you have now made a difference in someone's life. Every transaction and item are free. It is truly the easiest way to make a major positive impact in your community. Additionally, we are always looking for kids to join our cause! Anyone can join who wants to make a difference using the ambassador application on our website.



WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR OTHER TEENS WHO WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Simply put, you can make a major impact on your community at any age. More specifically, I would recommend finding something that interests you and help others in that field (i.e., enjoying math and tutoring kids for free in math). I don't think I'm that different from most teenagers. We all want to be kind to others and help them.



HAS ANYTHING CHANGED IN THE ORGANIZATION DUE TO COVID-19?

COVID-19 has forced me to think outside the box to continue our mission. We pivoted from in-person to virtual sports training. Unable to do our annual 3-point fundraiser, we are using social media for an online challenge/fundraiser. We also added the ability to donate and receive eLearning devices on our new app Alley-Oop to get devices to kids that need them for distance learning. ■

To find out more about how you can get involved, visit alleyoopkids.org. The Alley-Oop app is available now on the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store.

What can commercial real estate and hotel owners expect from the new capital markets landscape?

by RUSHI SHAH

THE ONGOING EFFECTS OF THE PAN-
demic continue to permeate through our industry. While news of a widespread vaccine is hopeful, we must first deal with a second surge of positive cases. Facing this uncertainty, commercial real estate owners – and especially hoteliers – are trying to understand and navigate the new norm. They want to know what it means for them individually and how to best adapt their business. In doing so, an obvious place to start is to look at the state of the capital markets and the markets' view of leverage, in-place and potential cashflow, cost basis for assets, risk-adjusted return, underwriting metrics, and other indicators.

HOTEL FINANCING

Hotel lending is back, whereby CMBS lenders are issuing term sheets and closing deals for hotels with in-place debt yield (net operating income, or NOI, as a percentage of loan amount) of 12 percent or more for the trailing 12 months. Lenders, mainly CMBS, are still focused on a stabilized loan-to-value of 65 percent. Within the current conditions, in-place cash flow is a natural corrector of leverage and therefore a metric that appraisers and

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Within the current conditions, in-place cash flow is a natural corrector of leverage and therefore a metric that appraisers and lenders are using to effectively value assets and size proceeds for loans, respectively.”

lenders are using to effectively value assets and size proceeds for loans, respectively. This is because the trailing 12-month period should reflect the degree to which the pandemic shutdowns affected the hotel and contributed to the cash-flow hit. Assets with cash flow that showed more resiliency during the past few months will have less of a COVID-19 discount applied to their value, while assets such as a full-service hotel in an urban market that saw more significant cash-flow degradation during that same time period will merit a larger adjustment. This discount can range from 7 percent to 20 percent of 2019 values. When seeking financing, it is important for owners to ensure that the analysis of how “COVID-proof” their property has been is accurate. Going through a professional with pre-existing relationships in the marketplace can definitely help maximize the asset’s calculated value and subsequent loan proceeds.

BRIDGE LOANS

There continues to be ample short-term capital from debt funds, with the majority of lenders looking to fund hotels at 6-to-9-percent interest rates on a non-recourse basis. Most lenders funding these deals tend to prefer select-service hotels in markets that are business-friendly and have largely remained immune to the industry shutdowns. These lenders also are ultra-focused on their ability to be refinanced

out of these loans by either a CMBS or another permanent loan when the market stabilizes.

COST BASIS

For capital markets participants, cost basis is an important decision driver. Lenders and equity providers want to make sure that the developer has skin remaining in the game after a refinance. For developers who are looking to build new hotels, there is capital available. For these projects, lenders will use dollars-per-square-foot and cost-per-key metrics as a barometer to measure the success rate of a particular asset. Developers should pay close attention to their construction costs and land costs to determine the real feasibility of the projects.

RISK-ADJUSTED RETURNS

Market participants also are focusing on risk-adjusted returns. This means lenders are comparing a hotel asset at an 8 Cap Rate to a multifamily asset at a 7 Cap Rate and trying to determine if the additional 1 percent of return is worth the risk that overnight renting of real estate carries.

UNDERWRITING METRICS

It is important for any lender to fully vet projections provided by the sponsor and challenge the assumptions to be able to successfully underwrite and exit the loan. As we anticipate a vaccine and start to emerge from the pandemic, most lenders

are underwriting potential hotel cash flow with 50-percent occupancy and \$80 to \$150 of ADR for assets in major markets that enjoy drive-to demand and do not rely on group travel. This is a good gauge to determine if a hotel will be able to support a given loan amount or not.

Now more than ever, every deal should be evaluated based on a case-by-case basis. In an everchanging market like we are in now, it is even more important to connect with a professional who is active in the market and who can help put together the best financing solutions for your properties. ■



Rushi Shah is principal and CEO of the commercial mortgage and real estate investment banking firm and AAHOA Allied Member Mag Mile Capital. As a leader in hospitality financing, Shah specializes in structuring and placing high-leverage, non-recourse bridge and permanent debt with cash out for full – and limited-service hotels nationwide. Since joining the firm’s predecessor, Aries Capital, in 2015, Shah has structured and closed hundreds of millions in financing for all property types. Shah has held previous positions at Northern Trust and has an MBA from the University of Chicago’s Booth School of Business.

The value of the post-stay guest survey

by DANIEL J. MOUNT, DBA

THE ELECTRONIC post-stay guest survey has an important place in a guest feedback program. While specific issues with specific guests can be identified and addressed through feedback obtained from digital channels and call centers, the post-stay survey provides more valid and reliable data in which to address systemic issues in the hotel operation.

VALUE OBJECTIVE

The value objective to different users of guest surveys varies and presents a challenge to hotel companies and brand managers when trying to design a survey that meets those

objectives in a somewhat constricted platform. Hotel companies and brand managers want big data that addresses demographics such as loyalty club membership, reason for travel, gender, and age as well as guest reaction to new brand standard initiatives or suggestions for brand standard enhancements. This must be balanced with the need of operators to get as much operations-specific information (cleanliness, friendliness, etc.) as possible. Surveys should have a mix of product-related and service-related questions. Owners can use product-related guest survey data to review how their asset is being maintained by a management company,

to support needed capital expenditures, or to suggest that required capital expenditures may be delayed. Owners also can use the service-related guest survey data to get a feel for the culture of the operation and the operators of the property. Owners, if independently or through an owner's association, drive what is included on a post-stay survey and how that survey then provides value to them in terms of insight and analysis.

MORE THAN PERFORMANCE DATA

At the property level, the electronic survey should provide

more than just performance data, as hotel GMs do not often have the time nor the statistical insight to parse and analyze what may be “pages” of electronic data. In addition to performance data on operations-specific survey items, the survey report must include information on the importance of those items (key drivers) in relation to outcome measures such as guest satisfaction, intent to return, and intent to recommend. The survey also should provide methodology that combines performance and importance (key drivers) results to help the operator focus on issues that are critical based either on the issue being important in its relationship

to an outcome measure or on low performance. Most importantly, the survey report should provide assistance in addressing critical issues. This is accomplished through attaching action plans of recommended courses of actions on items that appear as critical issues. Users can clearly see what the critical issues are and can access recommended courses of action to help them consider an appropriate response. In that way, a survey report does not just provide numbers, it provides valuable assistance that saves time for the user and support for resource allocation.

Like any evaluation tool, the guest survey should be used in a positive way. The survey results are provided to help operators improve the guest experience, raise the outcome measures of guest satisfaction, intent to return and intent to recommend, and increase revenue. Survey results are meant to inform operators of possible courses of action but are only one source of information. Survey results are not provided to support

negative actions such as job or brand termination as statistical confidence levels of survey results generally do not support such actions.

To summarize, owners should have a survey product that: 1) is well-designed through their brand or independent provider, 2) includes results and methodologies that focus on systemic product and service-related issues in the operation, 3) identifies the critical issues, and 4) provides recommended courses of action to help the operator address the critical issues. ■



Dan Mount is an Associate Professor in the Penn State School of Hospitality

Management. His research at Penn State has focused primarily on employee and guest satisfaction with an emphasis on survey design, methodology, and analysis. Prior to his time at Penn State, Dr. Mount held a number of executive committee positions in the hotel industry.

A NOTE ON COVID-19



COVID-19 has dramatically changed the guest experience. Research from the American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) shows that hotel guest satisfaction is declining during the pandemic. While some decline may be expected, two areas that showed the largest decline are the check-in experience and room cleanliness and comfort. It is intuitive that these two items are most associated with COVID-19 protocols. Recent research seems to agree that among many COVID-19-specific protocol issues, two that resonate with guests are communication of safety protocols and the visual impression that protocols are being followed. While specific incidents can be identified and addressed through digital channels, COVID-19-specific protocol issues likely will be systemic and should be incorporated into post-stay guest surveys. As these protocol issues likely will be with us for some time, the COVID-19-specific questions should be incorporated into existing methodologies that would identify them as key drivers/critical issues. Owners must insist, again independently or through an owner's associations, that brands or survey companies be responsive in adding or changing questions as the pandemic experience will change over time. Brands should understand that during COVID-19, quantitative measures on guest surveys may differ greatly from past measures due to the changing demographics of the sample and survey data should therefore be used as a learning tool and not as a means of punishment.

surveys at work

The work doesn't stop once a survey has been given and read. Look at any action items and list any critical issues that need to be addressed immediately and those that may take longer to approach.

Owners should expect that survey companies will be responsive in adding or changing questions as the pandemic experience will change over time.

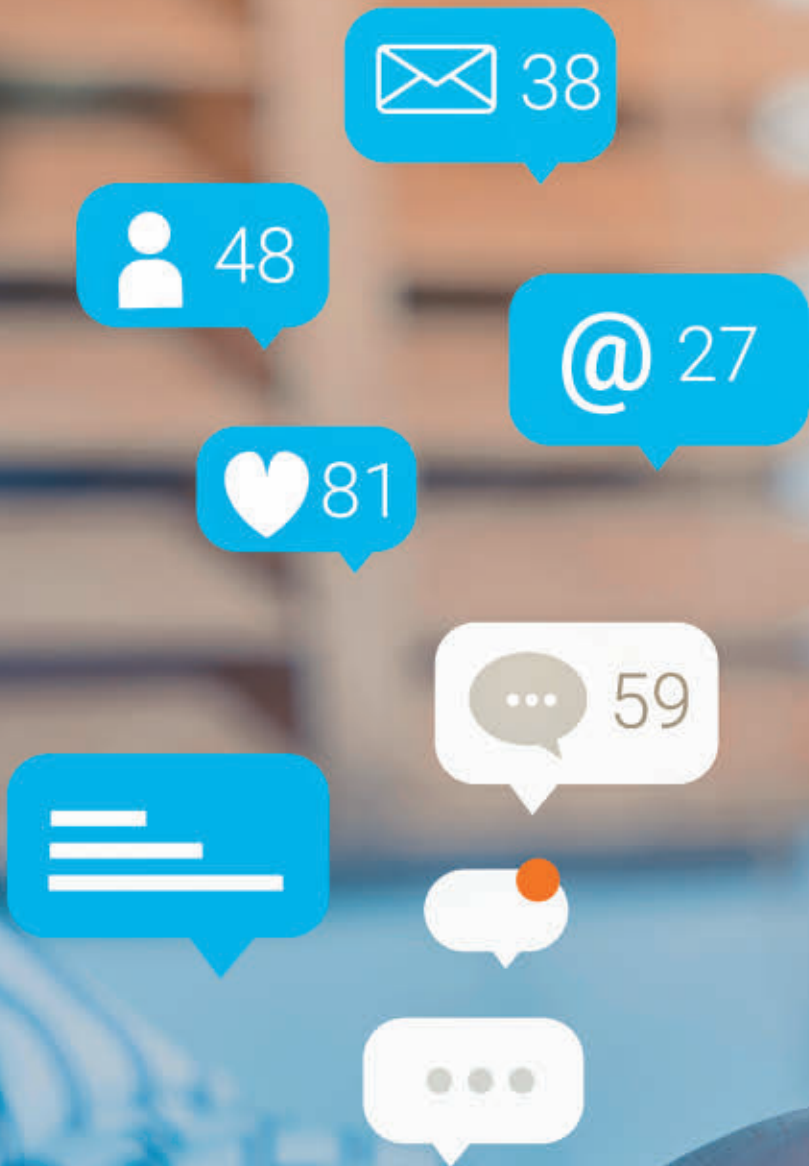
ALMA GRAPHICS/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

How hotels can attract the 3 types of travelers still active during COVID-19

By MARK SKROCH

TO SAY THAT THE PAST YEAR HAS been difficult for the hotel industry would be an understatement with COVID-19 and the associated travel restrictions resulting in a dismal 2020 for hotel bookings globally. Things are starting to look up with traveler confidence beginning to rise, and more people thinking about travel in the coming year. According to Destination Analysts, 23.1 percent of American travelers have taken a trip by air during the pandemic, and 58.1 percent have taken a road trip. Nearly 80 percent have at least tentative trip plans for some time in the next year.

Our research at BCV, a company providing social media solutions for the hospitality industry, shows social media inquiries



to hotels have increased by 44 percent in August 2020 vs. August 2019, with many of the questions surrounding outdoor activities, COVID-19 restrictions, Wi-Fi capabilities, and hotel cleaning practices – essentially all that comprises the “new normal.” This increase in social media communication comes as the current and near future COVID-19 travelers appear to be falling into a number of categories: staycationers, bargain hunters, and bucket listers, with each group having a series of wants that hotels can target.

STAYCATIONERS

Staycationers are tired of being at home, but they do not want to risk long-distance travel. They may want to visit family or friends locally or just explore parts of their home region. They also are motivated by work-from-home and remote-schooling trends that allow them to stay for a longer period. These vacationers are most interested in hotel COVID-19 measures, having great Wi-Fi connectivity, and information on local, outdoor entertainment. Staycationers typically travel by car and do not mind longer drives for the right destination. They are interested in having the right dates and prioritize the dates over price considerations. In addition,

staycationers will be interested in starting new traditions closer to home during the upcoming holiday seasons.

BARGAIN HUNTERS

Bargain hunters are motivated by obvious cost incentives and they have more comfort in taking risks in terms of traveling farther distances, traveling by plane, etc. What will attract these customers is the chance to stay in a hotel or a room that would normally be outside of their price point during normal travel times. Bargain hunters cut across different demographics. The younger members of Gen Y and the older members of Gen Z are two groups that are motivated by price, willing to undertake some risk in travel, and able to travel distances with the current remote work/learning capabilities.

BUCKET LISTERS

Bucket listers, the final category, have a different reaction than most to the restrictions from the pandemic. They are reminded of the temporal nature of life and that they cannot be guaranteed time for their planned adventures. They are motivated by the desire to see these exotic destinations and by the fact that the locations will likely not have the typical crowds. Having this travel experience without the typical crowds or wait time will be the primary motivators for this group.

REACHING OUT

The key to reaching these three types of travelers lies in social media and in knowing which platforms your audiences are on. Of the different platforms, Instagram continues to be the primary vehicle for travel research, as it has been for several years. There also are almost continuous rollouts of new Instagram tools to appeal to the shifting consumer mindset – such as short-form video feature reels – as well as the growing suite of marketing capabilities on Instagram, such as the “Shop Now” feature, which allows hotels to add booking capabilities to their stories. For each of the types of travelers listed above, Instagram can showcase what they are looking for in a getaway. For staycationers, content that reflects the hotel amenities as well as local attractions will resonate. For bargain hunters, content that shows the amount

of savings as well as more luxurious surroundings for lower prices will be good. For the bucket listers, content that shows the once-in-a-lifetime aspects along with the absence of traditional crowds will appeal to these travelers.

Another way that hotels can gain the attention of these three types of travelers as well as stay connected with past guests is to create custom content that would attract different audiences. To note, different platforms should be used for specific audiences, and that platform/audience mix will depend on the hotel’s primary demographic. Also, using a solid social channel mix will allow hotels to target users at multiple points of their journey. With that said, almost all social media users prefer short-form videos and it remains the most popular form of content.

TAP INFLUENCERS

Hotels should also build relationships with the two main types of influencers: multichannel and micro-influencers. Both types need to be community-focused and authentic, so the messaging remains true to the brand. Multichannel influencers can enable multiple connection points with consumers, helping to seed messaging at various points of the consumer journey and offering a deeper value for the partnership. For example, a user may consume the branded message via an influencer’s social post, podcast chat, and direct e-blast in one day, helping to drive overall awareness and consideration. A micro-influencer is one with 10,000 followers or fewer and who can create a more personal connection to resonate with a social user. This personal connection is something that consumers are placing an importance on as they plan future travel.

The recovery will take time and will be multifaceted, but those hotels that invest in a social media strategy looking for different types of customers will emerge in a stronger position. ■



Mark Skroch is the General Manager at BCV, a RateGain company. To learn more, visit <https://www.bcvsocial.com/>.

according to the **DATA**

A 2020 Destination Analysts survey of American travelers shows:

23.1% have taken a trip by air

58.1% have taken a road trip

Almost 80% have tentative trip plans this year

The payments process

Today's Hotelier sat down with Faheem Khan, Executive Director of Chase Merchant Services, to ask a few questions about how Chase can serve hoteliers

by FAHEEM KHAN



KACHKA/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE MOST COMMON ISSUES THAT HOTELIERS RUN INTO WHEN THEY SIGN UP TO ACCEPT CREDIT/ DEBIT CARD AND MOBILE WALLET PAYMENTS?

There are many intricacies involved in setting up hotels with payment processing that require lodging industry expertise. Not all payment processors specialize in the lodging industry so some of the most common issues other processors have include:

- Choosing the wrong MCC code at set up resulting in declined or downgraded transactions processing at a higher rate.
- Not integrating properly with a gateway causing delays in set up, processing functionality gaps, and lack of technical support.
- Misunderstanding the difference between host capture and terminal capture leading to transactions not settling on time.

- Setting up card brands incorrectly resulting in confusion between new and existing accounts, potential boarding delays, and not leveraging pre-negotiated pricing that the card brands offer.
- Implementing ineffective reporting causing chaos with statement reconciliation, managing retrieval requests, and ultimately chargebacks.

HOW IS CHASE DIFFERENT?

At Chase, we've built and educated our dedicated lodging team specifically for the unique needs of the lodging industry. Throughout the 20+ years Chase Merchant Services has been an AAHOA Industry Partner, our dedicated lodging team has been able to build long, meaningful relationships with many AAHOA Members. AAHOA Members help us understand their ongoing concerns regarding chargebacks, funding issues, current payment processor service challenges, statement disclosures and pricing, and current gateway provider

challenges. Because of our relationship with AAHOA Members and information-sharing, we know what you need and want, and we know what you don't like and what doesn't work. At Chase, we're laser-focused on addressing the unique needs of every AAHOA hotelier – from the independent owner to the multi-property operator.

THERE ARE SO MANY PROPERTY MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS AND GATEWAYS FOR HOTELIERS TO CHOOSE FROM, HOW CAN YOU HELP THEM NAVIGATE ALL OF THE OPTIONS?

When you've been around as long as we have, you know the players. We have experience and relationships with a multitude of gateway providers and property management systems. And we also help AAHOA Members steer through the intricacies of gateways and property management systems to solve your payment services needs regardless of the brand or the size of hotel you own.

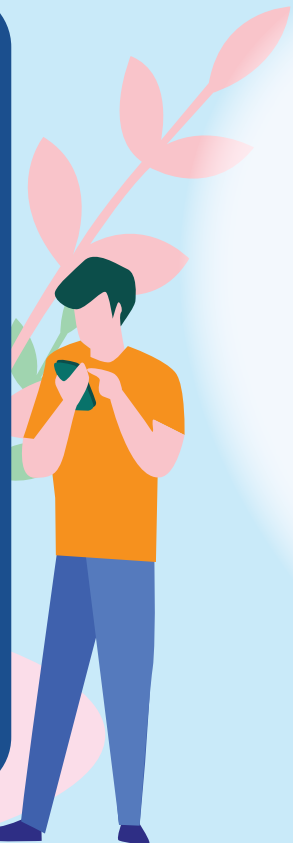
We integrate to numerous payment platforms to help you process your transactions efficiently. These include property management systems such as Fosse, SynXis, On-Q, Choice Advantage, Galaxy LightSpeed, Opera, Skytouch, AutoClerk, Visual Matrix, ASI, as well as many others. And, of course, we connect to standalone terminals. Because brands tend to use their own proprietary or preferred property management systems and gateways, we also interface with several brand property management systems.

At Chase, we help hoteliers tackle problems head-on and we can see around the corner to avoid future processing issues. If we can be a resource to you to help you solve some of the challenges associated with payment processing, don't hesitate to reach out. ■

Supporting Hoteliers During the **COVID-19 Pandemic**

With the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the lodging industry, low occupancy rates forced many hoteliers to lay off employees and face catastrophic financial situations. At Chase, we ceased all promotions to AAHOA Members (with exception to our commitment to *Today's Hotelier*). Instead, our dedicated lodging team started making calls to our existing merchants to make sure they were doing OK, to see if there was anything we could do to assist, and lent them our concerned and listening ears.

We also expeditiously assisted many AAHOA Members in solving their unique issues such as dealing with fraud, excessive chargebacks due to cancellations, funding delays, coordinating communications with PMS providers to assist Members with upgrading/enabling their POS equipment to be CHIP and contactless for a quicker, safer, and more secure method of taking payments, as well as helped wherever else we could.



Faheem Khan is proven leader with 25 years of recognized success in sales and business development. He serves on the AAHOA Board of Directors and is an Executive Director at JPMorgan Chase, leading the lodging and hospitality vertical within Merchant Services.

Happy guests are satisfied, but what happens when they're **not**?

By SHEETUL RAYEED

GUEST SATISFACTION IS CRITICAL TO THE success of your hotel business. Not only will a happy, satisfied guest usually return to your property, but they also will recommend your hotel to others. Unfortunately, not all guests leave happy. In these instances, a lawsuit may result from the actions or inactions the guest experienced leading to this dissatisfaction, whether real or perceived.

REASONS FOR LAWSUITS

In the hospitality sector, lawsuits can arise for a number of reasons, including, among others, slip-and-fall accidents, premises liability concerns, assault/security breaches on the property, issues surrounding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), discrimination, human trafficking allegations, theft, and/or health and safety concerns. These issues may present themselves in a variety of ways, from an angry guest letter to a summons from a local court. One way to foster guest satisfaction is to quickly handle at the property level any legal issues that may arise in the course of your business if you are put on notice. When this doesn't succeed in resolving the matter, a lawsuit may be the next step.

THE RIGHT LEGAL COUSEL IS CRUCIAL

Lawsuits are not uncommon in business ownership, but as hoteliers you should rely on the expertise of legal counsel in helping you navigate through any legal demand or lawsuit. Failure to follow strict legal processes and timing may result in a waiver of your rights or even a judgment being entered against you. Finding the right legal counsel is critical and can happen in several different ways.

First, maintaining adequate levels of insurance for all your needs and annually reviewing your business's insurance needs can help you avoid unnecessary legal costs and possible financial losses. When a triggering event occurs on your property, be sure to submit the claim to your insurance agent/carrier as soon as possible. If an insurance carrier provides coverage and defense, they'll appoint an attorney with expertise in

the specific field to represent your interests and help you through each and every step of the legal process.

If you do not have insurance coverage for the claim, ask fellow hoteliers or attorneys you know for referrals. While the attorney who does your estate work or real estate closing may be an expert in his/her field, you'll want to make sure the attorney you select is an expert in the area for which you are being sued.

RESOURCES FOR AAHOA MEMBERS

Additionally, while AAHOA cannot represent you or give you legal advice, we recognize that you might need an attorney referral or legal advice from time to time. AAHOA has a specialized network of attorneys available to you through our Allied Attorney Program. These attorneys are familiar with lawsuits commonly filed within the hospitality sector and want to help best protect your legal rights. We're happy to connect you with our Allied Attorney network for any and all of your legal needs.

Proper legal counsel should be a core component of any solid business plan to ensure guest satisfaction. Please feel free to reach out to us at franchise@aahoa.com. ■

prevent & protect

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Use the following checklist to help you address guest satisfaction concerns:

- Establish best practices for your business
- Establish customer response best practices
- Establish insurance and legal protocols



ALEXANDER LYSENKO/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

“

AAHOA has a specialized network of attorneys available to you through our Allied Attorney Program. These attorneys are familiar with lawsuits commonly filed within the hospitality sector and want to help best protect your legal rights.”

Club Blue

AAHOA
Industry
Partners
Share Their
Perspectives
on Guest
Satisfaction



A

What's your
philosophy
on guest
satisfaction?



Steven Werner, Vice President, Account Management, Avendra:

Avendra's philosophy on guest satisfaction is simple. We focus on ensuring the supply chain is optimized so our customers can focus on their guests' satisfaction. We negotiate the contracts and vet the suppliers and manage procurement challenges throughout the entire supply chain, so our customers can use that time and those resources for exceeding guest expectations.



Kaycee Strewler, MS, Senior Technical Account Specialist, RD&E, Ecolab:

Ecolab understands the impact guest satisfaction has on the vitality of a business, especially in the hospitality industry where a single-percentage-point improvement in guest satisfaction results in increased revenue. Ecolab prioritizes science-based expertise, innovation, and partnership to help customers improve guest satisfaction. We do this by providing robust and holistic hygiene and infection-prevention programs that evolve in lockstep with changing guest expectations. Our longstanding partnerships with customers and industry associations help inform the development of programs and solutions that are well positioned to meet guest expectations and drive industry growth.



Brian Venable, National Director for Content Distribution & Partnership Management, WarnerMedia:

HBO has always put quality content first when it comes to the hotel market. We believe premium, award-winning entertainment will always elevate the in-room experience with the best hit movies and original series that guests can consistently count on. With easily accessible entertainment options for all guests, HBO is the perfect in-room amenity for any hotel property.

How has COVID-19 impacted the ways hoteliers deliver great guest satisfaction?



Strewler:

While cleanliness has always been a top driver for guest satisfaction – with overall cleanliness of a room and cleanliness of a bathroom coming in at numbers one and two – COVID-19 has changed guest (and employee) expectations, how cleanliness is defined, and ultimately, the way in which hoteliers deliver guest satisfaction.

In response to COVID-19, guests expect hotels to have enhanced safety procedures and protocols, driving a shift to focus even more on cleaning for hygiene. Hotel environments not only need to look clean, but they need to be properly sanitized or disinfected as well. Guest expectations have driven hoteliers to consider the importance of demonstrating clean. Many have opted to highlight their enhanced cleaning procedures, making previously invisible hygiene efforts more obvious and visible. They've added additional amenities for guest use, such as hand sanitizer stations and disinfecting wipes in high-traffic areas to promote a culture of hygiene.

In addition to demonstrating clean, hoteliers are focused on communicating their additional efforts to provide clean, hospitable spaces. This is being done through on-site signage, social media channels, email blasts, and even consistent messaging delivered directly to guests by the employees. All of this messaging is meant to reassure guests and help drive guest satisfaction.



Werner:

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has caused an enormous change in guest behaviors and expectations. Regarding the next steps during the recovery period, there is obviously a heightened sense of safe food-handling practices and cleanliness, and properties will need to modify their operations to adjust to new regulations, brand standards, and guest concerns. Hoteliers also are starting to reimagine the guest experience, particularly with guestrooms, and consider changes such as removing magazines and notepads because they could be viewed as something additional in the room that could carry the virus. We also expect amenity kit offerings will continue to include PPE items such as masks, disposable wipes, and hand sanitizer. Operators must make it clear to guests that they are providing a safe and comfortable environment. In this new normal and after the pandemic ends, the supply chain will continue to support these changing needs.

Venable:

With limited or restricted property amenities, the need for an exceptional in-room experience is more critical than ever for hoteliers and their guests during a pandemic. As part of an effort to support the hotel industry, HBO pledged an unwavering commitment to provide the best in-room entertainment available and property rebates to offset the cost of HBO while we're on the road to recovery. HBO Property Rebates can be found at www.HBOBulk.com.



Werner:

Firstly, overall, I would like to believe the industry has learned that the need to continually evaluate and optimize all aspects of the hospitality supply chain for supply chain assurance has never been more apparent. For hotel operators, it should remain at the top of the list. It always was for us, and this year has just reinforced it even more. Secondly, the ability to react quickly to evolving circumstances is critical. Thirdly, having a well-trained and well-led team is incredibly important, especially during challenging times.



What did 2020 teach you and/or your company?



Strewler:

Ecolab has always understood the value of hygienic environments and robust infection prevention programs. For me personally, this pandemic reinforced the importance of the work we do every day in support of our customers and the hospitality industry, whether through on-site or virtual training, procedure development, or strategies to optimize operations during uncertain times. The year 2020 has taught me the importance of going back to the basics – ensuring that our customers understand the difference between cleaning, sanitizing and disinfecting, how to read product labels, and the significance of contact times. All of these go a long way in promoting hygienic environments.



Venable:

The year 2020 has increased our responsibility to actively listen to our customers, their guests, and our distributor partners throughout the industry. Under these challenging circumstances, we have become more resourceful than ever and continue to make our customers and hospitality partners our main priority. We must be creative and effective in offering support where possible and continue to adapt to the evolving challenges that affect us all.

What's one thing hoteliers can do right now to improve their business?



Strewler: One thing hoteliers can do right now is to not only demonstrate but also communicate the enhancements they've made to their hygiene and infection-prevention programs. We know cleanliness drives guest satisfaction and increased visibility into these protocols is one way they can help improve their business and manage through this COVID-19 era. Additionally, partnering with companies that can provide not only innovative solutions and personalized service but also ongoing consultative support and expertise will serve them well.

Anticipating the importance of cleanliness and hygiene today and into the future, we developed Ecolab Science Certified™ – a comprehensive program that helps businesses deliver a higher level of cleanliness through science-based products and protocols, training, and audit verification. Additionally, businesses can earn and display the Ecolab Science Certified seal digitally and onsite to serve as a visible sign of their commitment to advancing cleaner, safer practices.



Werner:

One thing hotel operators can do right now is to take an in-depth look at their purchasing strategies. They should be evaluating their purchasing practices and identifying specific opportunities across their portfolio, knowing what their properties are ordering and their margins, limiting delivery times and frequency, and centralizing purchasing when possible. Now is an ideal time to work with a procurement service provider who can help them lower their purchasing costs and ensure their supply chain is fully optimized so they can get back to business safely and efficiently.



Venable: Maintain a positive outlook and invest in the future. This pandemic affects us all both personally and professionally. Working together to reach our common goals and investing in technology for our customers is key. Innovative technology will not only enhance the guest experience, but it will make us stronger, more guest-focused, and sustainable on the road that lies ahead. ■



They should be evaluating their purchasing practices and identifying specific opportunities across their portfolio, knowing what their properties are ordering and their margins, limiting delivery times and frequency, and centralizing purchasing when possible.”



Steven Werner has more than 25 years of experience within the hospitality industry, serving in various roles, including Supply Chain Management and F&B/ OSE Purchasing and Consulting.

In his role as Vice President, Account Management at Avendra, Werner is responsible for managing a large group of clients with a team of account managers focused on helping clients improve their bottom-line and deliver high guest satisfaction. Avendra, an AAHOA Club Blue Partner, is North America's leading hospitality procurement services provider offering supply chain management solutions that are tailored to a client's business strategies and needs. www.avendra.com/aaoha/



Kaycee Strewler, a senior technical account specialist in the RD&E function, has been with Ecolab just shy of five years. She serves as a technical resource for global hospitality

and foodservice customers and has taken a primary role in consulting on product and procedure recommendations related to COVID-19. She has a Bachelor of Science in Biology and Environmental Science, a Master of Science in Natural Resource Sciences, and has held various roles at Ecolab in Regulatory and RD&E.



Brian Venable is National Director of Content Distribution overseeing Lodging Sales and Marketing at WarnerMedia. Based in Atlanta, GA, Mr. Venable's responsibilities

include promoting and selling HBO, CNN, and Turner programming to the lodging and multifamily industries for both linear and streaming services. He joined HBO in 1997 working in HBO's finance department and since then has held various positions in finance, sales and marketing. Brian earned a bachelor's degree from Wingate University in Wingate, NC. He is active in many industry organizations such as AAHOA, the American Hotel & Lodging Association (AHLA), and is a voting member of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

AAHOA MEMBERS IN ACTION



Randy Woodcock of United Way of Central New Mexico accepted a proceeds check from Regional Director Imesh Vaidya and Ambassadors after the 2020 Southwest Region Charity Golf Tournament. The event raised \$46,000 for the Pediatric Cancer Research Foundation, United Way of Central New Mexico, and RoadRunner Food Bank of Albuquerque.



AAHOA Member Babu Patel joined others in raising \$114,000 to benefit The Campaign for Children's of Mississippi.

AAHOA CLUB BLUE, PLATINUM & SILVER MEMBERS

The following companies provide generous ongoing support to AAHOA and its members. A heartfelt and sincere thank you is extended to every one of our vendor partners for their contributions to AAHOA and the industry at large. When searching for a provider, consider doing business with the following members.



ADP, Inc.

Thomas Bell: (973) 510-0196



AutoClerk, Inc.

Mohammed Hansia:
(925) 284-1005



Avendra

Mara Radis: (301) 825-0311



Chase

Faheem Khan: (800) 727-1872



Ecolab, Inc.

Michael Pfister: (317) 250-5189



Home Box Office

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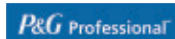
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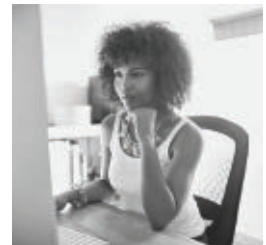
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